

Remarks at the National Defense University

September 9, 2008

Thank you, General, for your kind and short introduction. *[Laughter]* I am pleased to be back at the National Defense University again. It turns out this is my fifth visit as President. Every time I come here, I'm inspired and encouraged because of the brave men and women who work here. And I really do want to thank you for your warm hospitality.

Across the world, NDU students and faculty have served with valor in the war against these extremists and killers. On this campus, you're helping train the next generation of military and civilian leaders who will defend our Nation against the real and true threats of the 21st century. You've developed new ways for our military and civilian personnel to work together to meet the new challenges we face. I thank you for your patriotism; I thank you for your hard work; and I thank you for your devotion to protecting the American people.

I thank the Members of the Congress who have joined us, Congressman Randy Forbes of Virginia and Congressman Trent Franks of Arizona. Thanks for coming.

I'm going to be talking in a little while about a recommendation I have received from the Joint Chiefs. And I'm so pleased that the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Cartwright is with us today. Thanks for coming, Hoss.

I thank the leadership of the NDU. Thanks for having me again. I appreciate the civilian personnel, U.S. Government civilians studying here. And I thank those who wear the uniform. You know, one of the great things about being the Commander in Chief is to be the Commander in Chief of people who have volunteered to serve our country in a time of danger. I'm incredibly impressed by our military, and I am thankful to our military families.

You know, last week, a remarkable event took place in Iraq. At a ceremony in the city of Ramadi, responsibility for security in Anbar Province was transferred to Iraqi civilian authorities. Iraqi forces are now leading security operations across Anbar, with Amer-

ican troops in an overwatch role. With this transfer of responsibility, the people of Anbar took charge of their own security and their own destiny. It's a moment of pride for all Iraqis, and it was a moment of success in the war on terror.

Two years ago, such a moment was unimaginable to most. Anbar was one of the most dangerous Provinces in Iraq; Al Qaida was in control of almost every major population center. They had largely succeeded in turning the region into a safe haven, which brought them closer to one of their goals: a place from which to launch new attacks against America, our allies, and our interests in the region. In 2006, a military intelligence report concluded the Province was lost, and Anbar was held up as proof of America's failure in Iraq.

Yet, something remarkable was happening. The tribes in Anbar were growing tired of Al Qaida's brutality. They wanted to live a normal life, and this presented us with an opportunity to defeat Al Qaida in Anbar. Last year, we sent 4,000 additional marines to Anbar as part of the surge. The surge showed America's commitment to security. It showed we were committed to helping the average citizen in Anbar live a normal life. And it helped renew the confidence of local leaders, the tribal sheikhs, who then led an uprising to take Anbar back from the terrorists. Together, local tribes, Iraqi troops, and American forces systematically dismantled Al Qaida control across the Province.

Today, Anbar is a Province transformed. Attacks in the Province have dropped by more than 90 percent. Casualties are down dramatically. Virtually every city and town in Anbar now has a mayor and a functioning municipal council. Provincial Reconstruction Teams are helping local leaders create jobs and economic opportunity. As security has improved, reconciliation is taking place across the Province. Today, Anbar is no longer lost to Al Qaida; it has been reclaimed by the Iraqi people.

We're seeing similar gains in other parts of Iraq. Earlier this year, the Iraqi Government launched a successful military operation against Shi'a extremist groups in places like Basra and Baghdad and al-Amarah. Iraqi forces are staying on the offense. They are

pressing the advantage against those who would bring harm and danger to their citizens. They're conducting operations in and around the northern city of Mosul, where Al Qaida terrorists seek refuge. The Iraqi Army recently launched a new offensive against Al Qaida in Diyala Province. All these operations are Iraqi-led, with American forces playing a supporting role.

As a result of these and other operations in Iraq, violence is down to its lowest point since the spring of 2004. Civilian deaths are down, sectarian killings are down, suicide bombings are down, and normal life is returning to communities across the country. Provincial reconciliation is moving forward. The Iraqi Government has passed budgets and major pieces of legislation. Our diplomatic—diplomats report that markets once shuttered by terrorist violence are now open for business. Yesterday Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus reported to me via SVTS that they had just gone into a market area and seen the commerce and the activities. The Iraqi Health Ministry issued an interesting report that said that hundreds of doctors who had fled the fighting have now returned to serve the people of their country.

The reduced levels of violence in Iraq have been sustained for several months. While the progress in Iraq is still fragile and reversible, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker report that there now appears to be a degree of durability to the gains we have made.

Here's the bottom line: While the enemy in Iraq dangerous, we have seized the offensive. Iraqi forces are becoming increasingly capable of leading and winning the fight. As a result, we've been able to carry out a policy of return on success, reducing American combat forces in Iraq as conditions on the ground continue to improve.

We've now brought home all five of the Army combat brigades, the Marine expeditionary unit, two Marine battalions, that were sent to Iraq as part of the surge. I was proud to visit with some of those troops at Fort Bragg earlier this year. They are among our Nation's finest citizens, and they have earned the gratitude and respect of the American people.

Another aspect of our return on success policy in Iraq is reduced combat tours. Last

month, troops began deploying for 12-month tours instead of 15-month tours. This change will ease the burden on our forces, and I think, more importantly, this change will make life for our military families easier.

I'm pleased to announce the next step forward in our policy of return on success. General Petraeus has just completed a review of the situation in Iraq, and he and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have recommended that we move forward with additional force reductions, and I agree. Over the next several months, we'll bring home about 3,400 combat support forces, including aviation personnel, explosive ordnance teams, combat and construction engineers, military police, and logistical support forces.

By November, we'll bring home a Marine battalion that is now serving in Anbar Province. And in February of 2009, another Army combat brigade will come home. This amounts to about 8,000 additional American troops returning home without replacement. And if progress in Iraq continues to hold, General Petraeus and our military leaders believe additional reductions will be possible in the first half of 2009.

The progress in Iraq is a credit to the valor of American troops and civilians, the valor of Iraqi troops, and the valor of our coalition partners. And I thank those who are here from other nations for joining us, and I thank you for working with our troops. We welcome you to the United States. And we appreciate your working closely with those who wear the uniform.

Since Operation Iraqi Freedom began—I want our fellow citizens to hear this fact—more than 140,000 troops from 41 countries have served as part of our coalition in Iraq. Sons and daughters of Australia, Azerbaijan, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, and Ukraine have given their lives in the fight against the extremists. The citizens of these countries have sacrificed for the cause of freedom in Iraq. America has been proud to serve alongside such courageous allies.

I congratulate our coalition partners on their historic accomplishments in Iraq and

for maintaining their resolve during the dark days. Thanks to their determined work and the growing capability of Iraqi forces, many of our partners in Iraq are now in a position to return on success as well. Australia has withdrawn its battle group, the Polish contingent is set to redeploy shortly, and many more coalition nations will be able to conclude their deployments to Iraq this year, thanks to the skill of their troops and the success of their missions.

The important task in the period ahead will be to work toward the conclusion of a strategic framework agreement and a status of forces agreement between the United States and Iraq. These agreements will serve as the foundation for America's continued security support to Iraq once the United Nations resolution authorizing the multinational forces there expires on December 31st of this year. They will allow us to establish a bilateral relationship between the United States and Iraq like those we have with dozens of other countries around the world.

Early on in this struggle, I made clear that America's goal in Iraq was to help the Iraqi people build a democratic nation that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself. And thanks to the success of the surge, Iraq is making steady progress toward that goal. The steps I've described here at NDU will help us build on this success. It will set America's engagement in Iraq on a strong and steady course, and it will allow our troops to come home in victory.

Al Qaida's leaders have repeatedly declared that Iraq is the central front of their war with America, but it is not the only front. As Al Qaida faces increased pressure in Iraq, the terrorists are stepping up their efforts on the front where this struggle first began, the nation of Afghanistan.

After September the 11th, 2001, coalition forces destroyed the Taliban regime. We drove Al Qaida from the Afghan sanctuary where they had plotted and planned unprecedented attacks on our country. We helped Afghans begin to build a new democracy. Together with our military, American civilian experts helped the Afghan people build their economy and provide basic services and expand health care, as well as opened up schools for Afghan girls and boys.

These were important successes. Yet, the enemies of a free Afghanistan refused to give up the fight. They sought to undermine the democratic government so they could regain the place of dominance they enjoyed in Afghanistan before September the 11th. With the help of their sanctuary in Pakistan, they ruthlessly attack innocent Afghans across the country.

As the security situation changed, America and our coalition partners responded with troop increases. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, I told our allies the United States was deploying 3,500 more marines to Afghanistan, and that we would make additional forces available in 2009. I also called on allies to increase their force levels. And during the past year, the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Australia, Germany, Denmark, the Czech Republic, and others have sent additional forces to support the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

These troop increases represent a quiet surge in Afghanistan. In all, the number of American troops in the country increased from less than 21,000 2 years ago to nearly 31,000 today. The number of coalition troops, including NATO troops, increased from about 20,000 to about 31,000. And the number of trained Afghan Army and police forces increased from less than 67,000 to nearly 144,000.

These troop increases have made a difference, yet huge challenges in Afghanistan remain. This is a vast country. And unlike Iraq, it has few natural resources and has an underdeveloped infrastructure. Its democratic institutions are fragile. Its enemies are some of the most hardened terrorists and extremists in the world. With their brutal attacks, the Taliban and terrorists have made some progress in shaking the confidence of the Afghan people. And in the face of all these challenges, the Afghan people are naturally questioning what their future looks like.

Afghanistan's success is critical to the security of America and our partners in the free world. For all the good work we've done in that country, it is clear we must do even more. As we learned in Iraq, the best way to restore the confidence of the people is to restore basic security, and that requires more troops. I'm announcing today additional

American troop deployments to Afghanistan. In November, a Marine battalion that was scheduled to deploy to Iraq will instead deploy to Afghanistan. It will be followed in January by an Army combat brigade.

The mission of these forces will be to work with the Afghan forces to provide security for the Afghan people, protect Afghanistan's infrastructure and democratic institutions, and help ensure access to services like education and health care. They will show the citizens of Afghanistan that the Government and its partners will stand with them in the battle against the Taliban and the extremists. They will help clarify a stark contrast in Afghanistan: While the terrorists and extremists deliberately target and murder the innocent, coalition and Afghan forces risk their lives to protect the innocent.

Regrettably, there will be times when our pursuit of the enemy result—will result in accidental civilian deaths. This has been the case throughout the history of warfare. Our Nation mourns the loss of every innocent life. Every grieving family has the sympathy of the American people. And I've given President Karzai my word that America will work closely with the Afghan Government to ensure the security of the Afghan people while protecting innocent life.

As we deploy these reinforcements, America will take new steps to help the Afghan Government mobilize more forces of its own. Afghan fighters are good fighters. If you talk to people who have been in Afghanistan, they'll tell you the Afghan troops are courageous; they just need some help. Along with the Afghan Government, the United States and our allies are now launching a new initiative to double the size of the Afghan National Army over the next 5 years. We'll also work to increase the involvement of Afghan tribes. Local Afghan forces were key to our successes in 2001 and 2002, when we combined the 21st century capabilities of the American military with the courage of Afghan fighters on horseback. In the period ahead, we will once again encourage Afghan security forces and Afghan tribes to take a leading role in the building of a democratic Afghanistan. The Taliban and Al Qaida will not be allowed to return to power. The terrorists will suffer the same fate in Afghanistan that they are

now suffering in Iraq, and they will be defeated.

In addition to these new military measures, we're stepping up efforts on the civilian side. We're increasing our civilian presence with new personnel from USAID and the Drug Enforcement Agency, as well as the Foreign Service. We're using Provincial Reconstruction Teams of military and civilian experts to help local communities fight corruption, improve governance, and jump-start their economies. We're using agricultural development teams to help Afghan farmers feed their people and become more self-sufficient. We're supporting Afghanistan's National Development Strategy, which helps the democratic Government in Kabul offer greater support for the Provinces in areas like health and infrastructure.

We're working with the Afghan authorities to prepare for elections of 2009 and 2010. Recently at an international conference in Paris, America pledged \$10 billion over the next 2 years to support Afghanistan's development. In all these ways, we're working to ensure that our military progress is accompanied by the political and economic gains that are critical to the success of a free Afghanistan.

As we take these new steps in Afghanistan, we must also help the Government of Pakistan defeat Taliban and Al Qaida fighters hiding in remote border regions of their country. These extremists are increasingly using Pakistan as a base from which to destabilize Afghanistan's young democracy. In the past year, the Taliban, Al Qaida, and other extremist groups operating in these remote regions have stepped up their attacks against the Pakistani Government, hoping to stop that country's democratic progress as well.

This morning I called Pakistan's newly elected leader, President Zardari. I pledged the full support of America's Government as Pakistan takes the fight to the terrorists and extremists in the border regions.

Defeating these terrorist and extremists is in Pakistan's interest, they pose a mortal threat to Pakistan's future as a free and democratic nation. Defeating these terrorist and extremists is also Pakistan's responsibility, because every nation has an obligation to govern its own territory and make certain

that it does not become a safe haven for terror. America and our NATO allies will continue helping Pakistan in its efforts to defeat the extremists. The same terrorists who murdered innocent civilians in Karachi and Islamabad are plotting new attacks against the United States and Europe.

Each of these three places I've discussed today—Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan—pose unique challenges for our country. Yet, they're all theaters in the same overall struggle. In all three places, extremists are using violence and terror in an attempt to impose their ideology on whole populations. They murder to impose their dark vision of the world. In all three places, America is standing strongly with brave elected leaders and determined reformers and millions of ordinary citizens who seek a future of liberty and justice and tolerance.

Defeating our enemies requires success on the military front. Together with our allies, we've made substantial progress toward breaking up terrorist networks, and we will not rest until they are destroyed. Defeating our enemies also requires success in the ideological battle. We must show the people of the broader Middle East a better alternative to a life of violence and despair, and that alternative is based on liberty. History shows that people who are given the choice between freedom and tyranny will choose freedom. And history shows that freedom will yield the peace we all want.

There will be difficult moments in the work ahead, and yet we can be confident in the outcome. With faith in the power of freedom, we will transform nations that once harbored our enemies into strong and capable allies in the war on terror. With faith in the power of freedom, we will prove that the future of the Middle East belongs not to terror, but to liberty. And with faith in the power of freedom, we will leave behind a safer and more peaceful world for our children and our grandchildren.

I thank you for all you do to keep America safe. I thank you for your service in freedom's cause. May God bless you, your families, and our country.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:57 a.m. in Eisenhower Hall. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Frances C. Wilson, USMC, president, Na-

tional Defense University, who introduced the president; Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan; and President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Remarks During a Visit to Walter Reed Army Medical Center

September 9, 2008

The President. General, thank you for your hospitality, and thank you for your leadership.

I come to Walter Reed to do a couple of things; first, I pay my respects to those who have been wounded. I've come to pay my respects to the healers and doctors and nurses, and thank them for their service. I can truthfully say that the health care our troops receive here is first-class.

I've also come to pay my respects to family members that are praying that their loved one can get back on their feet and serve again, or get back on their feet and live a normal life.

It's—this is a interesting experience because, on the one hand, you see the horrors of war; on the other hand, you see the courage of the people that have volunteered to serve. I marvel when I come to Walter Reed, I marvel at the fact that people say to me, "Mr. President, I'd do it again." And you see somebody in bed who's been severely wounded, and they look and they say, "I'm honored and proud to have served." They had one kid in there who got hurt pretty bad, and he says, "I'm looking forward to getting back in uniform, getting back on the frontlines."

America is lucky to have men and women who volunteer to wear the uniform and to serve to protect us. And, General, we're lucky—and they're lucky—to have health care that can provide for the wounded and provide comfort to those who need the care. So, I'm honored to be with you.

Maj. Gen. Hawley-Bowland. Well, thank you. You energize our staff, as well as the patients and their families, to get even better. So, thank you very much.

The President. Thank you all. Thank you.